
JOURNAL OF IBERIAN ARCHAEOLOGY

vol. 1
1999



**Off-print of
Journal of Iberian Archaeology
Volume 1 - 1999**

Published by
ADECAP
Rua Aníbal Cunha, 39 - 3º - Sala 7
4050 Porto - Portugal

TIME, LANDSCAPE AND BURIALS

1.

MEGALITHIC RITES OF ANCIENT PEASANT SOCIETIES IN CENTRAL AND SOUTHERN PORTUGAL: AN INITIAL OVERVIEW

by

Victor S. Gonçalves*

Abstract: The author presents some questions about the big 'half-orange' (the *tumulus* of classical passage graves) and about 'what lies under the peel' (the megalithic rituals). What are the meanings for the structure and for the type of burials? What is the significance for the number and nature of votive and ideotechnic artefacts? The decorated schist plaques are also discussed. Some monuments excavated by the author are specially referred: Penedos de S. Miguel (Crato), Olival da Pega 2 (Reguengos de Monsaraz), Pedras Altas and Curral da Castelhana (at the *Alto Algarve Oriental*). Nevertheless, a particular attention is given to a key monument, Poço da Gateira 1 (Reguengos de Monsaraz).

Key-words: Neolithic; Chalcolithic; megalithism; rituals.

Resumo: O autor comenta alguns aspectos da grande 'meia-laranja' (o *tumulus* das antas) e do que se esconde 'sob a sua pele' (os ritos megalíticos). Que significados para a estrutura e tipo dos monumentos? Que significado para a natureza e quantidade dos artefactos votivos e ideotécnicos? Igualmente se discutem as placas de xisto com decoração geométrica. Particular atenção é dada a alguns monumentos escavados pelo autor: Penedos de S. Miguel (Crato), Olival da Pega 2 (Reguengos de Monsaraz), Pedras Altas e Curral da Castelhana (no Alto Algarve Oriental). Enfatiza-se ainda o ritual evidenciado num monumento-chave, Poço da Gateira 1 (Reguengos de Monsaraz).

Palavras-chave: Neolítico; Calcolítico; megalitismo; rituais.

1. THE BIG "HALF-ORANGE": WHAT LIES UNDER THE PEEL

In theory, most Portuguese megalithic monuments were, *ab ovo*, precisely that: a structure of earth and stone in the shape of a half-orange situated on a site which was expressly designed to bear its weight.

* Professor at the Faculty of Letters, Lisbon Director of UNIARQ, Centro de Arqueologia, Faculdade de Letras, PT-1699, Lisboa Codex. E-mail: vsg@mail.doc.fl.ul.pt

We may ask ourselves various questions at this point:

1. In order to commence construction work (and upon commencing), was there a specific series of ritual acts?
2. Did the choice of the site itself and the construction plan (the "orientation" of the monument) have anything to do with decisions based on astronomical knowledge or the underlying magico-religious sub-system?
3. Did the number of orthostats used in the construction relate merely to construction requirements, or was it dictated by special rules (resulting in many monuments in the "classic" centuries built with 7 orthostats)?
4. Are *kerbs*, where they occur, merely a device for holding back the earth, or do they symbolically delimit the magico-religious area around the *tumulus*, or both?

We have no reliable information regarding the first point, despite a surfeit of opinions. With regard to the third and fourth questions, the line between an intelligent guess and pseudo-metaphysical imaginings is so tenuous that it suffices to attend a symposium on the history of religions in order to become aware that, from a given angle, the most common, frequent or materialistic events can be magically transformed into mysterious rites or cults involving the worship of an androgynous god or the devil himself. For some people, making a silk purse out of a sow's ear is easier than to attempt the subversive exercise of changing the silk purse back into a sow's ear...

In fact, it is not unlikely, for example, that the symbolic value of the number 7 may be older than the written evidence might lead us to believe. However, to decide to build a megalithic monument from one single head-orthostat is easier and more practical, and naturally results in an odd number of orthostats in the chamber. Considering the average diameter of chambers (and that of the orthostats), 7 appears to be a natural and appropriate number in such a planned construction, and one which is purely pragmatic and not necessarily symbolic.

It might also appear natural that the function of the *kerb* should be to hold back water (or earth), but we only need to look at a modern building site to see that the piles of sand intended for cement are usually surrounded by *kerbs*, an expeditious and efficient way of preventing run-off.

That still leaves, of course, the orientation of the monuments and their location in the landscape, which, despite appearances, are two quite different matters. I have previously written that the whole question cannot be dissociated from the factor of time, which is frequently overlooked by astronomers and by some of the archaeologists who have become interested in this area.

In fact, magico-religious precepts (such as the symbolic interpretation of the landscape) are not *always* unchanging, and the content, even when its appearance is identical, may be substantially different. Thus, there is no doubt that different factors, which may vary from region to region, affect the placing of a megalithic monument in the countryside. In the north-eastern Algarve the known passage graves (*antas*, in portuguese) stand out unusually clearly in the landscape. In Reguengos de Monsaraz or Évora, the question must be approached differently. The situation in Crato is special, as is that obtaining in Portalegre. Elvas seems to call for a case-by-case analysis. As for the Lisbon Peninsula, the situation is so complex that it calls for re-examination in the near future, and it is still too early to discuss it here.

Of course, in the better-known cases (Reguengos de Monsaraz among them), there

are constants and overall trends in the location (and orientation) of the monuments, but a warning ought first to be given: in order to "categorize" the orientation of a monument and its location in the landscape we must know *when* it was constructed, which means either that we must excavate it, and with luck find the first untouched layers, or else base our conclusions on reports of earlier excavations. In the latter case, apart from some excavations carried out by the Leisners, records are rare, and it is quite possible, even in the latter half of the 20th century, that they simply do not exist. In the former case, the element of luck is unfortunately too great, and good archaeologists have on their CVs dozens of monuments whose interest was very shortlived, resulting in considerable disturbance to these sites.

As to the "half-oranges", which are frequently destroyed by agricultural work or simply ignored by archaeologists, they are another unknown rather than a collection of firm, related data.

2. TYPES OF BURIALS

We now enter a domain which is not metaphysical and therefore, fortunately, gives little room for mystical meanderings. However, the largest obstacle here is the state of preservation of bones; these are nearly all totally destroyed by the acidity of the soil of Central and Southern Portugal.

Despite this, the following have so far been identified:

1. Direct burials ('primary inhumations');
2. Burial of partial or whole skeletons ('secondary inhumations').

There are significant variations in both. Thus, the former may take the form of either basic burials, with no deliberate actions after burial, or primary inhumations in which the middle part of the bodies was cremated, probably in order to carbonize the viscera. The latter custom should not be confused with the cleansing fires customary in various burial sites (Leisner, 1951; Gonçalves, 1992) which do not relate to the time of the burial but rather to a decision, which could be very much later, to fumigate an area which had become fetid as a result of accumulating corpses and lack of air circulation.

As regards the second case, the following variations have been recorded: interment of the whole skeleton, or interment of selected parts of the skeleton, in which the cranium is always present but nearly all the other bones may be missing.

Is any period or place associated with these two behavioural patterns? From excavations at Lapa da Galinha, Lugar do Canto and Cova das Lapas, on the limestone massif, we know that, in the fourth millennium, the megalithic cave societies practised direct primary inhumations and, occasionally, burial of selected bones. One example of the latter is the niche burial at Cova das Lapas (Alcobaça) which consisted of a cranium with two heel bones leaning against the foramen magnum. The fact that they were a right and a left heel, although from different individuals, shows that elements in symbolic "reconstructions" were probably collected from a burial place prior to final inhumation.¹ Also, in the red stratum in Lapa do Fumo, the signs indicate that these too may be secondary inhumations, but we cannot state that this obtains generally throughout. In the

¹ Physical anthropological data provided by Santinho Cunha, who is working with the author on the monograph on Cova das Lapas.

nearby Lapa do Bugio, as in Cova das Lapas, both types seem to coexist, with primary inhumations and an ossuary which could be either original or the result of the cave having been broken into.

3. RITUAL BURIAL OF VOTIVE ARTEFACTS

Few, many or no artefacts: what is their significance in the context of the excavation of a megalithic monument?

Apart, of course, from cases where burial sites have been raided in historic or even prehistoric times, the presence of objects at a site is generally related to magico-religious requirements, and also to other factors, such as the clothes and adornments of the corpse, sometimes linked to its personal status. Obviously an archer must be buried with his bow and quiver, but the fact remains that the number of arrowheads never coincides with the number of presumed burials per tomb, which is understandable if we bear in mind that in all likelihood women and children were not buried with weapons and hunting equipment.

However, the 'gender' of certain objects is not yet clear. Were bone pins used by both sexes or only by women? Interestingly, a very recent excavation has raised a number of questions here. In the first phase of occupation of the OP2b *tholos*, attached to Anta 2 at Olival da Pega (Reguengos de Monsaraz), it is probable that there were 118 burials, since a little over 64 bone pins were found. Although almost nothing is known about prehistoric demography, these figures do not appear to be unusual. While there are no indications as to the sex of the occupants of the *tholoi*, bone pins were personal ornaments, like necklaces and bracelets, not votive items, and were also part of clothing in much the same way as buttons would later be part of coats.

Unfortunately, a difficult problem almost invariably arises and must once again be mentioned: the scarcity or non-existence of skeletal remains because of the acidity of the granitic or schistose soil. Thus, certain cases will never be explained: is the paucity of remains in the Anta Grande do Tapadão, in Crato, due to repeated raids, or is it the burial site of a particularly esteemed chief whose tumulus was kept for an individual burial?

On the other hand, if all the bones had disappeared from Lugar do Canto, would we not say we were dealing with a similar case? Surely not, if we consider the regional context. However, we must not forget that the 12 main burials at Poço da Gateira as well as the burials of the fourth millennium in the limestone massif had apparently very little by way of grave goods.

4. THE DECORATED SCHIST PLAQUES

Due to lack of space it is not possible to deal with even the most basic questions concerning the decorated schist plaques engraved with geometric patterns. I have therefore chosen only some points of particular interest, and would refer the reader to recent work in which the question has been dealt with in depth (Gonçalves, 1992).

The time-span of these plaques is now well known. It was identified (Gonçalves, 1989b) as the second half of the fourth millennium and the first half of the third millennium, and new dates have confirmed the original hypothesis on the dating of the plaque workshop at Cabeço do Pé da Erra and of the first phase of the OP2b *tholos* (Gonçalves, *in press-a*). However, regional variations are not unlikely, and it should be

possible to give more accurate time-spans for Reguengos de Monsaraz and Évora, and even for the Lisbon Peninsula.

Another interesting point, which has already been touched on (Gonçalves, 1992), concerns the way in which the decorated geometric schist plaques were associated with the dead. In the two cases with which I am familiar (since I am responsible for the excavations), the burial site of the "shaman" at Cova das Lapas (Alcobaça) and of the "founder" at the OP2b *tholos*, the plaques had been placed on the chest of the individuals and the holes at the top were thus clearly functional. But what of the tablets with no holes? Obviously in such cases the plaques may have been intended for a subsequent inhumation, and was therefore only laid on the mound of bones corresponding to the individual to be reinterred. In that case, of course, there would be no need for perforations.

Another question concerns the symbol of the Sun-Eyed Goddess and its appearance on the tablets. All the cases studied seem to point to its appearance from the beginning of the third millennium, when prehistoric metal-working societies were beginning to settle in what is today Portugal. The symbol of the Goddess engraved on stone, which may be found from the *tholoi* at Los Millares to the fortifications at Vila Nova de S. Pedro, from Huelva to Reguengos de Monsaraz, is prominent in the beginning and probably the whole of the first half of the third millennium. Some isolated elements, burial sites and settlements, even suggest that it is also present in the second half of the millennium. However, did the copper workers still make plaques, or did they reutilize those from earlier tumuli? There is clear evidence for the second possibility, but it is not wholly incompatible with the first.

5. THE PASSAGE GRAVES OF PENEDOS DE S. MIGUEL AND OF TAPADÃO (CRATO)

In Crato, an important group of megalithic monuments was identified and (unfortunately) mostly excavated in the 1970s.

I have studied the remains of this significant complex of monuments and, in addition to the work on the decorated schist plaques and the sandstone votive plaques which I intend to publish separately, I aim to publish reports on tombs identified by my team, in particular on those without passages or on small tombs with short passages. However, of particular interest are the questions already raised by Anta Grande do Tapadão, excavated by A. Isidoro and re-excavated by myself, and by the passage grave at Penedos de S. Miguel (Gonçalves *et al.* 1981, 1983-84, a-b).

These two large tombs, whose impressive size is still evident in the case of the Anta Grande do Tapadão, are located relatively close to each other, and have a feature which clearly distinguishes them from each other: their contents.

The extremely sparse grave goods in Tapadão could be interpreted as the result of raids. However, as we know, such raids seldom reached the tomb passages, and on excavating the site I found only a very few pottery sherds and a fragment from a sandstone tablet.

At Penedos de S. Miguel, despite raids which reached the compacted floor-level of the chamber, we found 184 pottery sherds, 108 items of personal adornment, 62 sandstone plaques, both intact and in fragments, 24 decorated schist plaques engraved with geometric patterns, some of which were in one piece and others in fragments, 23 geometric microliths and 310 arrowheads.

Thus, the passage grave at Penedos de S. Miguel appears to be a large collective burial site for at least some 86 individuals, a number which was arrived at by counting the

plaques. In the case of Tapadão, it is not even possible to determine the maximum number of occupants, but it became clear to me that this tomb may not have been a collective site, but rather represents the burial of an individual of sufficient standing to justify a 'single' grave. The nature of the items found makes it certain that both tombs were in contemporaneous use: the difference in the number of items found in them reflects their different purposes.

6. THE TWO PASSAGE GRAVES AT POÇO DA GATEIRA (REGUENGOS DE MONSARAZ)

Of these two small monuments, ANTA 1 was certainly the first to be constructed. As I have reported elsewhere, it features a small, narrow passage, and is one of the very few which remained intact until excavated.

Unlike the large collective burial sites, this was a tomb intended for primary inhumations, the individuals being placed there immediately after death, so that the chamber was rapidly filled (presumably by only 11 bodies, the twelfth being buried in the short passage). Of particular significance here is the ritual use of ochre: the bodies were literally daubed in red ochre, which is still to be found today on the votive artifacts placed in the hands of the dead.

The votive objects placed next to the dead form a set by association. They consist of geometric microliths, the trio of round-section axe/adzes/carpenter's gouge, and smooth-surfaced items of pottery, closed in shape and generally spheroid, coated in good quality red pigment (ochre). The way in which the artifacts are grouped in each burial is, however, even more interesting: 1 axe + 1 adze + 1 vase (+ 1 or 2 geometrical microliths); it is probable that, in some cases, the adze was replaced by a gouge. Finally, the bodies were deposited in either a sitting or crouching position, starting at the internal wall of the head-orthostat (backstone).

As I have pointed out elsewhere, the main importance in relation to the circumstances noted at Poço da Gateira 1 could be that it was one of the missing links between an early phase of clearly neolithic burials, probably represented by small tombs with one or two primary inhumations, and collective ones which, in view of the number of burials for which they were intended, required secondary interments and thus, in practice, acted exclusively as ossuaries.

Also of great importance is the fact that no schist plaque, whether engraved or otherwise, has been found at Poço da Gateira. We are thus dealing with burials prior to their generalized use, and therefore in theory occurring in the first half of the fourth millennium.

7. THE PASSAGE GRAVES AT PEDRAS ALTAS AND CURRAL DA CASTELHANA, IN THE NORTH-EASTERN ALGARVE

Situated in the north-eastern Algarve, these two passage graves are rather too near the southern Alentejo for it to be possible to associate them with the rare megalithic sites of the Algarve coast (Gonçalves, 1989a).

In the passage graves at Pedras Altas four ritual elements are of particular interest:

1. a microburin;

2. a sea shell;
3. a rock crystal;
4. a stone placed as burial marker.

A microburin, a *déchet de taille* of the geometric microliths, may appear in settlements or workshops, but is seldom found in funerary monuments. Its presence here, next to geometric microliths, could not have been accidental, and must point to some votive act in which the intention was to include the results of various technical endeavours. This is of particular interest if we bear in mind the symbolic value which geometric microliths acquired during the fourth millennium, when their functional characteristics disappeared completely. The shell, that of *Ruditapes decussata*, shows once again the symbolic importance of certain bivalves, which appear in the second half of the fourth millennium in rituals relating to the world of the dead (pecten found in the cave at Escoural and at Cova das Lapas) and by the first half of the third millennium in the foundations of fortified sites (Monte Novo dos Albardeiros phase 1). Hyaline quartz (rock crystal) is not an unusual find in these contexts, but demonstrates an interest in a raw material sought for the manufacture of bladelet and arrowheads (Penedos de S. Miguel, Olival da Pega 2). Finally, the gravestone, a small block roughly pyramidal in shape, placed upon the original floor of the passage grave, is part of the varied list of megalithic monuments in the Algarve, from Alcalar to the eastern Algarve, but the fact that nearly all of them are devoid of human bones makes it difficult to understand its true function (did it indicate the head of the individual or merely identify a heap of bones?).

The dolmen at Curral da Castelhana is noteworthy for at least two reasons: the concealment of a round-section perforated axe among the orthostats of the chamber, and the use of a carefully polished parallelepipedal stone as a votive plaque. This tomb contains both smooth-surfaced and geometrically decorated schist plaques, together with a vase typical of the early third millennium, as at S. Pedro do Estoril 1 and in the *tholos* connected to Anta 2 at Olival da Pega.

CONCLUSION?

Symbolic and ritual acts are complex events occurring in specific contexts, and it is only in those contexts that they may be completely understood. As Gallay has pointed out, in relation to pottery used for magic-religious purposes, "Le commentaire de l'informateur (et souvent seulement de l'initié) est *toujours nécessaire* à la compréhension du symbole.... Il est donc totalement illusoire dans ce cas de vouloir restituer le sens et la fonction rituelle ... si l'on ne dispose pas d'un corpus de références local obtenu par l'enquête directe. Les systèmes symboliques ne sont en effet ni logiques au sens de la logique scientifique ni homogènes au sens où certains détails, souvent insignifiants, ont une importance alors que d'autres détails n'ont qu'une valeur décorative" (Gallay, 1986: 131).

This expresses all the reservations with which we must approach areas as strongly subjective as those dealing with mythograms and supernatural manifestations or even apparently simple funerary rites.

Lisbon, Autumn 1995
(Text revised Autumn 1998)

REFERENCES

- CERDÁN MÁRQUEZ, CARLOS, LEISNER, GEORG and VERA (1952) – *Los sepulcros megalíticos de Huelva*. Madrid.
- GALLAY, A. (1986) – Protohistoire et Ethnologie Ouest-Africaine: (non) pertinence du codage céramique. In *A propos des interprétations archéologiques de la poterie: questions ouvertes*. Paris: Éd. recherche sur les civilisations. Mem. 64. p. 107-165.
- GONÇALVES, VICTOR S. (1989a) – *Megalitismo e Metalurgia no Alto Algarve Oriental, uma perspectiva integrada*. Lisboa: INIC/UNIARQ, 2 vols.
- GONÇALVES, VICTOR S. (1989b) – Manifestações do sagrado na Pré-História do Ocidente Peninsular. 1. Deusa(s)-Mãe, placas de xisto e cronologias: uma nota preambular. *Almansor*. Montemor-o-Novo: Câmara Municipal. 7. p. 289-302.
- GONÇALVES, VICTOR S. (1992) – *Revendo as antas de Reguengos de Monsaraz*. Lisboa: UNIARQ/INIC.
- GONÇALVES, VICTOR S. (1993) – Manifestações do sagrado na Pré-História do Ocidente Peninsular. 3. A Deusa dos olhos de sol. Um primeiro olhar. *Revista da Faculdade de Letras de Lisboa*. 15, 5a série. p. 41-47.
- GONÇALVES, VICTOR S. (1995) – *Sítios, "Horizontes" e Artefactos. Leituras críticas de realidades perdidas*. Cascais: Câmara Municipal.
- GONÇALVES, VICTOR S.; TREINEN-CLAUSTRE, FRANÇOISE, and ARRUDA, ANA MARGARIDA (1981) – Anta dos Penedos de S. Miguel (Crato). *Clio*, Lisboa: Centro de História da Universidade de Lisboa. 3, p. 153-164.
- GONÇALVES, VICTOR S.; TREINEN-CLAUSTRE, FRANÇOISE; ARRUDA, ANA MARGARIDA, AND ZAMMIT, JEAN (1983-84a) – Anta dos Penedos de S. Miguel (Crato). Campanha 2(82). *Clio/Arqueologia*. Lisboa: UNIARQ. 1. p. 225-227.
- GONÇALVES, VICTOR S.; TREINEN-CLAUSTRE, FRANÇOISE, and ARRUDA, ANA MARGARIDA (1983-84b) – Anta dos Penedos de S. Miguel (Crato). Campanha 3(83). *Clio/Arqueologia*. Lisboa: UNIARQ p. 229-230.
- LEISNER, GEORG AND VERA (1951), republished in 1985, – *As Antas do Concelho de Reguengos de Monsaraz*. Lisboa: IAC (UNIARQ/INIC).
- LEISNER, VERA; PAÇO, AFONSO DO; RIBEIRO, LEONEL (1964) – *Grutas artificiais de S. Pedro do Estoril*, Lisboa: Serviços Geológicos de Portugal.
- LEISNER, VERA; ZBYSZEWSKI, G., AND FERREIRA, O. DA VEIGA (1961) – *Les grottes artificielles de Casal do Pardo (Palmela) et la Culture du Vase Campaniforme*. Lisboa: Serviços Geológicos de Portugal.
- LEISNER, VERA; ZBYSZEWSKI, G., AND FERREIRA, O. DA VEIGA (1969) – *Les monuments préhistoriques de Praia das Maças et Casaínhos*. Lisboa: Serviços Geológicos de Portugal.

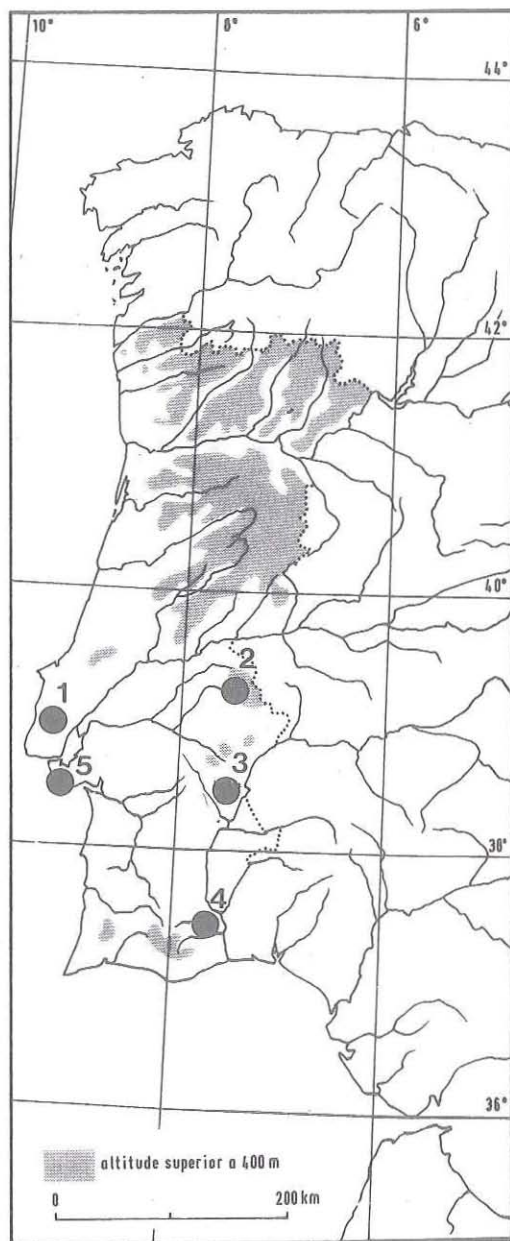


Fig. 1 – Some monuments and sites quoted in text: 1. Lisbon peninsula (Cova das Lapas, Lapa da Galinha, Lugar do Canto, S. Pedro do Estoril). 2. Portalegre (Anta Grande do Tapadão, Penedos de S. Miguel). 3. Reguengos de Monsaraz (Anta 2 do Olival da Pega, Poço da Gateira 1, Monte Novo dos Albardeiros). 4. Alto Algarve Oriental (Curral da Castelhana, Pedras Altas). 5. Setubal peninsula (Lapa do Fumo, Lapa do Bugio).

Contents

Editorial

On archaeological interpretation

Archaeogenetics

Atapuerca's double contribution to the cannibalism debate

A behavioral perspective on "archaic" lithic morphologies in Portugal. The case of Fonte da Moita open air site

Late Pleistocene human occupation of the Iberian Peninsula

The Alto Ribatejo (Portugal) and the neolithisation

Time, landscape and burials I. Megalithic rites of ancient peasant societies in Central and Southern Portugal: an initial overview

Copper metallurgy and the importance of other raw materials in the context of Chalcolithic economic intensification in Portuguese Estremadura

Late Neolithic and Chalcolithic in the Ribeira de Cheleiros: A synopsis

The re-creation of territorialities and identities in the III millenium BC: research problems in Central Portugal

Patterns of warfare and settlement in Southeast Spain

Some comments on the archaeological heritage of the Late Bronze Age in Beira Interior

The Roman temple of *Scallabis* (Santarém, Portugal)

The cemetery as an urban space

Reports

Report on the initial excavations of Brecha das Lascas and Galeria Pesada (Almonda, Portuguese Estremadura)

Taphonomy of a carnivore-accumulated rabbit bone assemblage from Picareiro Cave, Central Portugal

Castelo Velho (Freixo de Numão, Portugal). The charcoallified plant remains and their significance

The Roman *villa* at Montinho das Laranjeiras: 1996 archaeological campaign

News

Reviews



ADECAP

Associação para o Desenvolvimento da Cooperação em Arqueologia Peninsular
Association for the Improvement of Cooperation in Iberian Archaeology